

Book Review by Edell M. Schaefer

# Life After Kevin

*A Mother's Search for Peace and the Golden Retrievers that Led the Way.* By Susan Lynch – c2022



*It is safe to say that all of us have experienced many times over the many facets of the human-animal bond. Regardless of our involvement in conformation, obedience, field, therapy work or dozens of other venues, at the base level our dogs are cherished companions, and friends with four legs and fur. For Susan Lynch, the presence and unconditional love of her Golden Retrievers provided a lifeline for her in the sudden and tragic death of her son Kevin.*

*The memoir begins in February 2015 on a family vacation in Costa Rica. Seventeen family members are staying in a luxury villa to celebrate the 50th wedding anniversary of Susan's in-laws. The idyllic setting and fun-filled activities offer no clues to the tragedy that will follow seven months later. When Susan, her husband, Tom, and their two adult sons, Matthew and Kevin, part ways at the airport, it is the last time that the family will be together.*

*In September 2015, Susan traveled to Ohio for the GRCA National Specialty where "Tripp" competed and earned his Master Hunter title. Back at the hotel, she called Kevin to share news of Tripp's accomplishment. Susan and Kevin share such an energetic conversation that even the reader can recognize Kevin's impish delight and excitement for experiencing a full life. Joy turns to disbelief and gut-wrenching sorrow six days later when Kevin dies of an accidental drug overdose.*

*Like the currents in a river, the topics Susan is passionate about weave together to produce a compelling read...grief and loss, coping and resilience, emotional health, canine companionship, transformation and growth.*

EMS: What would you like us to know most about Kevin?

SL: When Kevin was little and was having fun, he used to say, "This is the best day of my life!" Even into his 20's he never seemed to lose that childhood wonder, to live presently and enjoy what was in front of him. He was one of the friendliest and kindest people I've ever known. Tom and I have often said he had all the best traits of a Golden Retriever.

EMS: Knowing that most people fear or hide from emotional pain rather than acknowledge it, what suggestions do you have for helping someone move through their grief?

SL: Trying to keep my grief in check around other people, whether at work, grocery shopping, and even sometimes friends and family, was a monumental effort. It was exhausting to put on a false face and not burst into tears in public. Although everyone's grief is unique, here are a few things I found necessary and helpful.

- I highly recommend giving yourself time to fall apart in private as a way to release what needs to be expressed. I made it an essential

part of every day to give grief my full attention by going into Kevin's bedroom with my dogs to just cry.

- There are many parts to grief, not just the loss of a person. As hard as it was, I took time to think about all the things that I would never see happen, like Kevin getting married and having children of his own. I needed to acknowledge those losses too.
- Eventually, my scheduled crying time also included journaling stories of Kevin from when he was little, writing him letters and notes on things I was learning about myself emotionally.

Making sure I had some time every day to unpack and process a little bit more of my pain was the key to finding the peace I was searching for.

EMS: The death of a child, even an adult child, frequently drives couples apart, yet Kevin's death has strengthened your marriage. Can you tell us more about the relationships between you, Tom and the dogs that would illustrate how important love, support, understanding, or simply "being present" can ease the pain and promote healing?

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SL Tom and I grieved very differently but we always made listening to each other our priority. I spoke about my grief more than Tom did, and, as a result, I had to remind myself that just because he wasn't as talkative as me, it didn't mean he was "grieving wrong." We made a few rules so as not to alarm each other unnecessarily. For example, when leaving a phone message we'd start with "No emergency." Overall, we were sensitive to each other's needs and made a big effort to keep the lines of communication open between us.

"Manny" and "Tripp" mirrored the sadness of my grief right from the start. When they were in the house, they were calm and attentive supporters and stayed alongside me for months. Before Kevin's death, they had been used to a lot of physical exercise, training five or six days per week. After Kevin died, the only activity we continued was walking in the woods. On our walks, they would notice the details of their surroundings, have a luxurious roll on the grass, and truly enjoy themselves. They were able to experience both the sadness and the joy in their life. I saw them as role models of how I wanted to be. My life was now forever divided into two parts – before and after Kevin died. They showed me that although it was important to grieve, it was also important to enjoy what is in the present, right in front of me. They showed me that sorrow and joy could coexist.

EMS: At what point, or in what circumstance did you find peace, hope, and purpose?

SL Sparks of hope came often and were spontaneous, whereas peace and purpose were more of a gradual process.

There were many instances where I experienced hope during my journey, but the first time I felt it was the day after Kevin's funeral when Tom and I received an undeniable sign from Kevin. That sign opened me up to the possibility that Kevin and I were somehow still connected and that he could hear and answer me.

Finding peace was a gradual process that happened from intentionally taking the time to process my grief. This daily practice helped me to know myself on a deeper level which lent itself to releasing outdated beliefs and giving me the courage to live my truth.

Finding my purpose was a matter of aligning what I was good at with what I cared about to help contribute to the greater good. In the chapter "One Bowl of Soup," I stumbled upon the realization that helping others made me feel good. The polished version of that revelation happened when I started the Life with Rune Facebook group. During my life, before Kevin died, I had trained and competed with my Goldens in multiple venues since 1995. During the pandemic, I knew people would be needing support because there weren't any puppy classes to go to. I decided to document how I was socializing and training my puppy, Rune, from the moment he came home at eight weeks old through his first year. This was my way to help the puppy community that was completely aligned with my passion, which in turn helped me.

EMS: Is there anything not in the book that you feel it's important for people to understand about drug use?

SL I'd like for people to know that someone who has lost a loved one to substance use has to deal with the widespread stigma over how their loved one died, which complicates their grief. When I told people that my son died, I was almost

always asked "What happened?" or "How did he die?" It sounds like an innocent enough question but it can spark feelings of shame, anger and blame. It also leaps over the fact that the person's loved one died to get to the details of how they died. I would suggest that if the cause of death is not offered please be respectful and do not ask questions. The family's immediate needs are compassion and condolences.

EMS: What is your greatest wish for anyone who is dealing with what you and your family experienced?

SL A big part of my goal for writing this book was to shine a light on stigma by humanizing overdose and how it affects the people who loved them. If we think in terms of "good" and "bad" ways to die, we are inadvertently measuring the value of the person's life. Kevin loved his family, friends, dogs, music, and the outdoors. He was kind, sensitive, funny, and open-minded. I'd like others to see that making peace with the circumstances surrounding their loved one's death can help them remember more of the love you shared and who they were as a person.

EMS: Is there a question that hasn't been asked that you feel compelled to answer?

SL During my early grief, I decided to stop training and dog shows for as long as I needed to take care of my emotional health. Stepping away from something I had enjoyed for over 20 years and had been a big part of my identity was a hard but necessary decision. I've not felt the push to go back to dog shows, but I've also not taken it off the table as a possibility down the road.

This past spring I was a co-instructor for Yankee GRC's field classes, which was a lot of fun and rewarding to see the dogs and handlers progress. Rune has a good foundation under him (just in case) but right now we are just enjoying each other's company. ❖

Life after Kevin will be released on October 3, 2022. It will be available at Amazon, [BarnesandNoble.com](https://www.barnesandnoble.com) and on Susan's website at [www.susan-lynch.com](http://www.susan-lynch.com). Visit her website to find photos of scenes depicted in the book.

### Key to photos:

Opposite page top right: Susan and Kevin, left side top to bottom: Kevin and Bailey 1995; Kevin with a hummingbird and the Lynch family on vacation in Costa Rica 2015; Susan and "Manny" – CH Beau Geste Being Ramiroz UD MH WCX\*\* OS DDHF VCX CCA; "Tripp" – Lazydaze Blissan Triple Ur Pleasure CD MH WCX VC CCA. Above: Susan and Manny.



*In 2021 the GRCA awarded Susan with the Rachel Page Elliot Featherquest Lifetime Achievement Award for sharing her knowledge to help educate others on puppy training. Donna Kelliber photo.*